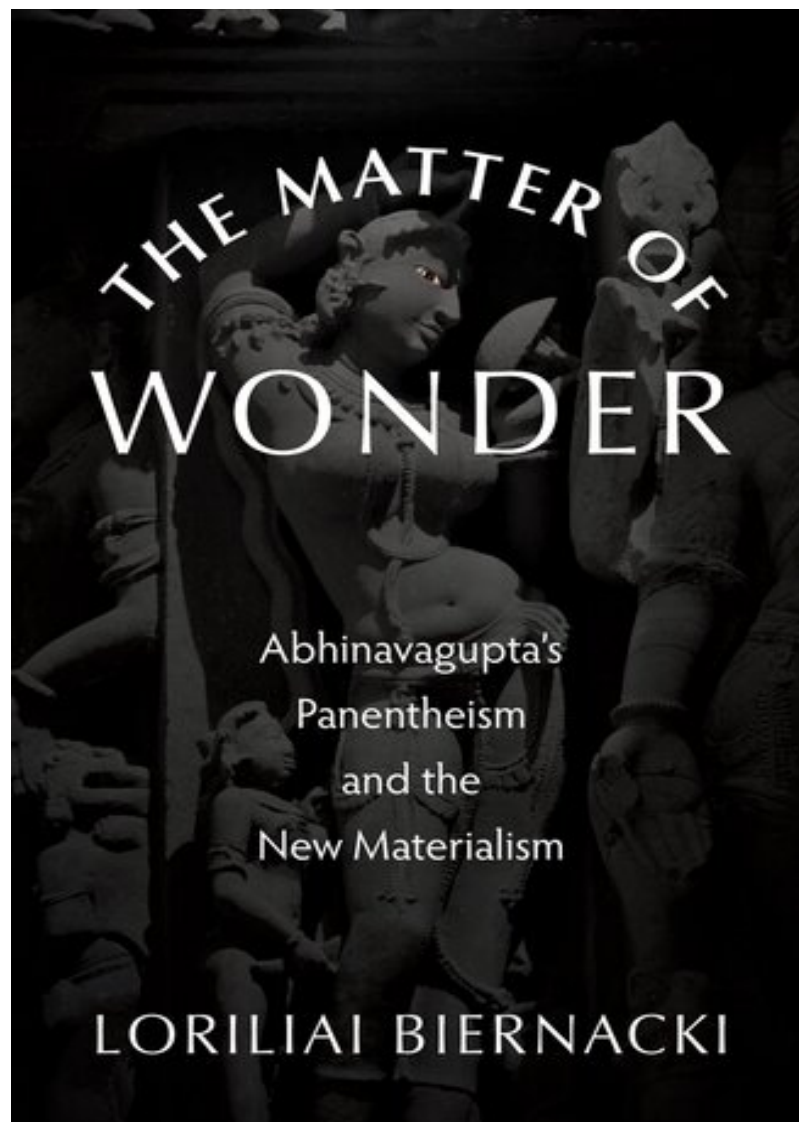


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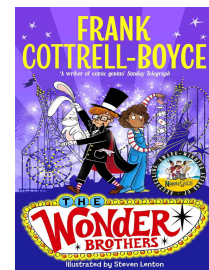


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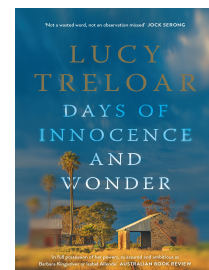
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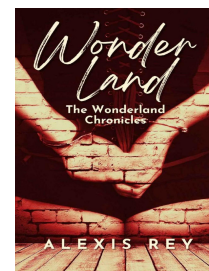
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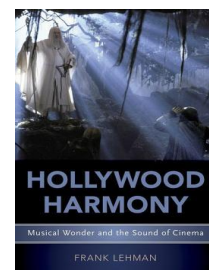
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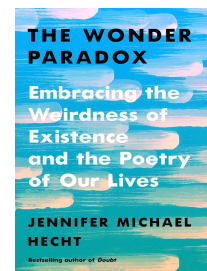
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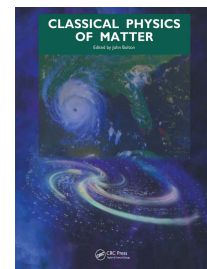
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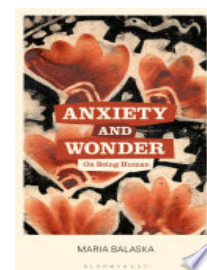
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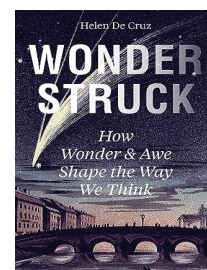
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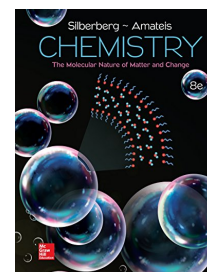
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THE MATTER OF WONDER

Abhinavagupta's
Panentheism
and the
New Materialism

LORILIAI BIERNACKI

The Matter of Wonder

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*Abhinavagupta's Panentheism and the New
Materialism*

Loriliai Biernacki

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The Matter of Wonder: Abhinavagupta's Panentheism

Introduction

I bow to him who pierces through and pervades with his own essence this whole, from top to bottom, and makes this whole world to consist of *Śiva*, himself.¹

—**Abhinavagupta**

We may someday have to enlarge the scope of what we mean by a "who."

—**John Archibald Wheeler**

Even down to a worm—when they do their own deeds, that which is to be done first stirs in the heart.²

—**Abhinavagupta**

If thou be'st born to strange sights, Things invisible to see, Ride ten thousand days and nights, Till age snow white hairs on thee, Thou, when thou return'st, wilt tell me, All strange wonders that befell thee

—**John Donne**

In this book I argue that the panentheism of an 11th-century medieval Indian Hindu thinker can help us to rethink our current relationship to matter. Writing in northern India from 975 to 1025 CE, the Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta (950–1016) articulated a panentheism—*both* seeing the divine as immanent in the world and at the same time as transcendent—as a way of reclaiming the solidity, the realness of the material world.³ His theology understood the world itself, with its manifold inhabitants, from gods to humans to insects down to the merest rock as part of the unfolding of a single conscious reality, *Śiva*. This conscious singularity—the word "god" here does not quite do justice to the pervasive panentheism involved—this consciousness, with its capacity to choose and will, pervades all through, from top to bottom; human and nonhuman, as Abhinavagupta tells us, "even down to a worm—when they do their own deeds, that which is to be done first stirs in the heart."⁴ His panentheism proposed an answer to a familiar conundrum, one we

still grapple with today—that is: consciousness is so unlike matter; how does it actually connect to the materiality of our world? To put this question in more familiar 21st-century terms, how does mind connect to body? This particular question drives the comparative impetus for this book.

Abhinavagupta

A towering figure in India's philosophical landscape, influential far beyond the boundaries of his native Kashmir in the thousand years since his death, Abhinavagupta wrote extensively on Tantra, an innovative religious movement that began in India in the first half of the first millennium.⁵ Tantra as a religious system cut across religious boundaries, steering Buddhist groups and sectarian Hindu groups, Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava, and even an abstinency-minded Jainism⁶ away from an earlier ascendant asceticism to a philosophy and a praxis more keenly focused on the body as part of the path of enlightenment and on ritual, especially ritual involving the body.⁷ Perhaps in keeping with Tantra's attention to the body, it may not be surprising to find Abhinavagupta exercising his keen intellect as well in the domain of the senses, writing also on aesthetic theory.⁸ And while Abhinavagupta is especially well known today for his writing on Tantric philosophy and ritual, it is probably fair to suggest that historically in India his pan-India fame rests especially on his writings on aesthetics, where his theoretical interventions shaped aesthetic understanding through the following centuries.⁹ This material, sensual orientation shapes a physical portrait we have of him as well. One of his devotees, as Pandey tells us, a disciple who studied directly with Abhinavagupta, Madhurāja Yogin, gives us a visualization of Abhinavagupta.¹⁰ Certainly, the intervening centuries make it hard to accord it any genuine accuracy; still the image we have is evocative, redolent of a sensual, physical embrace of the world. His long hair tied with a garland of flowers, bearing the insignia of a devotee of the god Śiva, *rudrākṣa* beads, and three

lines of ash on his forehead, he plays a musical instrument, the *vīṇa*, and in an anticipated Tantric gesture, two women are at his side holding lotus flowers and the aphrodisiac betel nut.¹¹ Portraits aside, Abhinavagupta's writing is compelling and fresh even after these ten centuries precisely because of Abhinavagupta's ability to weave philosophy within a mundane material awareness.¹² Keen in its psychological comprehension, his acute sensibility of how the mind works can help us navigate our own contemporary engagement with the matter all around us.

My Argument

Particularly for a New Materialism, I propose that Abhinavagupta's articulation of panentheism, centered around a foundational subjectivity, gives us a first-person perspective that may offer a helpful intervention for our world today as we rethink our own relationship to matter, to the natural world around us, other humans and nonhumans, and the rapidly disappearing insects and worms that cross our paths.¹³ Abhinavagupta's panentheism postulates a single reality, *Śiva*, which unfolds out of itself the wonderful diversity of our world. He tells us that

the category called *Śiva* is itself the body of all things. "On the wall [of the world which is itself *Śiva*] the picture of all beings appears, shining forth"—This statement indicates the way that all these appear.¹⁴

His panentheism aims to keep our sights on the world, with all its matter and multiplicity, as real. A tricky endeavor for a singular reality, *Śiva*, a nondualism.¹⁵ Classical, familiar attempts at nondualism try mostly to show us how our idea of the multiplicity of the world as real is just a mistake in judgment. Abhinavagupta's panentheism instead reformulates the relationship between matter and consciousness. He draws on psychological, linguistic modes, the idea of subject and object, to tell us that we find nested within materiality the possibility of a first-person perspective, even in a

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mere rock.¹⁶ We find consciousness at the heart of matter. Rethinking the boundaries of life, matter, and consciousness, his strategy offers a way to think through materiality, for a New Materialism in particular, compelling in its decentering of the human.

I focus on key elements of Abhinavagupta's panentheism to address central issues for a New Materialism. First, his use of wonder (*camatkāra*), I propose, serves to alter our vision of matter, pointing to its essential liveliness. Moreover, it reinscribes transcendence within a bodily subjectivity. Second, I suggest his use of the term *vimarśa*, a kind of active awareness, can help us think through how we get the idea of sentience, that is, to think through the relationship between what is living and what is not. Third, I propose that he uses his inherited cosmological map of what there is (familiar to students of India as the *tattva* system) to map phenomenologically how this originary consciousness, *Śiva*, progressively transforms its original subjectivity in stages to become objects, the materiality of earth and water that make up our world. Fourth, in addition, I suggest that he draws on the *tattva* system to chart how we get the many out of the One. Fifth, I propose that we may read the theology he gives us of the subtle body as a way of affording intentionality to the affective processes of the body, outside of human egoic intentions.

Finally, I propose that Abhinavagupta's strategy for connecting consciousness to materiality can instruct our own century's adoptions of panpsychism and dual-aspect monisms, models that contemporary philosophers and scientists use to solve the problem of how life and consciousness relate to mere matter—particularly in terms of our current enthusiasm for ideas of information. In this, I use Abhinavagupta's philosophy to address issues relevant for us today, and I do so comparatively, drawing on our own current cultural preoccupations to frame his panentheism.¹⁷ In sum, I argue that Abhinavagupta's panentheism is too important a resource to not be used in our current construction of our world, particularly in the face of our rapidly increasing capacity to manipulate matter—and, indeed, in view of the consequent ecological results.

In the five chapters that follow I present an outline of Abhinavagupta's panentheism, charting how his panentheism maps the relationship between materiality and consciousness, between immanence and transcendence. But my particular focus is on the material side of the equation. Abhinavagupta's nondualist panentheism has, assuredly, been invoked more generally in the context of an idealism, that is, more on the consciousness side of things.¹⁸ Here, I contend that paying attention to his sophisticated articulation of materiality can help us in our own understanding of what matter is and how it matters. To get a feeling for the importance of matter in his nondualism, we can compare him with another nondualist, the great nondual mystic of the 20th century, the South Indian Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). Ramana Maharshi's philosophy is often aligned with the nondualism of Advaita Vedānta, the well-known Indian philosophical conception, in a nutshell (though this is perhaps too brief), that the world we experience here is illusory, is *Māyā*. Ramana Maharshi instructs us to ignore the world. We do not need to know about the world, he tells us; we just need to know about the Self.¹⁹ He instructs us

[t]o keep the mind constantly turned inwards and to abide thus in the Self is the only Self-enquiry. Just as it is futile to examine the rubbish that has to be swept up only to be thrown away, so it is futile for him who seeks to know the Self to set to work enumerating the *tattvas* that envelop the Self and examining them instead of casting them away.²⁰

In other words, we do not need to know what our world is made of in order to get enlightened. It is rubbish, futile knowledge; simply toss it out. In contrast, Abhinavagupta tells us:

Now, it would not be correct to say that for our present topic—i.e., to convey the recognition of the Lord—it is not necessary to ascertain the world as object to be known; [this is not correct, because] only to the extent that one makes the world into an object, to the extent that it is known, can one then transcend the level of object, of thing to be known and allow the true sense of the knower to take root in the heart, its fullness being grasped by mind, intellect and ego.²¹

Abhinavagupta addresses head on the assumption that enlightenment means we drop the idea of a world out there. Even if his readers might think that the path to enlightenment means concerning ourselves only with the highest, the recognition (*pratyabhijñā*) of the Lord, as we hear in the echoes of Ramana Maharshi's advice, Abhinavagupta instead reminds us that the fullness of insight also includes the materiality of the world. Only by knowing the world do we allow the real sense of the knower to blossom in the heart. It is, of course, important not to understate the legacy of transcendence and idealism that Abhinavagupta inherits and embraces. However, in this book I will focus especially on the materialist side of Abhinavagupta's thought. Rather than on the wall of the world that is *Śiva*, my center of attention is instead on the fantastic diversity of the picture, which has mostly been neglected in much of the excellent work on this thinker.²²

My Primary Source Material

My thinking on Abhinavagupta and his perspective on the materiality side of things has been especially influenced by my primary source material. I have worked particularly with the third section of one of Abhinavagupta's last works, his massive *Īśvara Pratyabhijñā Vivṛti Vimarsinī* (*Ipvv*), the *Long Commentary on the Elucidation of Recognition of the Lord*, composed in 1015 CE.²³ The Sanskrit text, handed down in manuscript form through generations from Abhinavagupta's time, was first published in Kashmir in three volumes from 1938 to 1943; I draw primarily from the third section, titled the *Āgamādhikāra*, comprising 100 pages of Sanskrit.²⁴ Abhinavagupta's text is a commentary; he provides explanatory notes to a text written approximately 50 years earlier by his great grand teacher Utpaladeva, the *Īśvarapratyabhijñāvivṛti* (*Elucidation of Recognition of the Lord*), which is itself a commentary on a shorter set of verses composed by Utpaladeva, *Īśvarapratyabhijñākārikā* (*The Verses on Recognition of the Lord*).

Thus, we have a commentary on a commentary on an original set of verses. Abhinavagupta also wrote a shorter commentary on Utpaladeva's compelling verses, and Utpaladeva wrote his own autocommentary as well.²⁵

The *Āgamādhikāra* deals particularly with received knowledge, what the tradition has passed down. *Āgama* is typically translated as "scripture" or "revealed text." Abhinavagupta and Utpaladeva, however, use the term not so much to focus on particular scriptures or textual sources, but rather to discuss knowledge of the cosmos, the cosmology that we find in the *tattva* system, the classification of all that exists, handed down by tradition.²⁶ Abhinavagupta explicates the received tradition of cosmology, the *tattva* system, within his understanding of a subject-object continuum, offering us a map of how an originary consciousness, *Śiva*, unfolds to become the myriad objects that make up our world. The two chapters of the *Āgamādhikāra* chart out what the world is made of, following Abhinavagupta's Tantric classificatory scheme of cosmology, the *tattvas*, and then addresses the tradition's understanding of different modes of subjectivity in relation to the objects we find in the world. Describing these two chapters, Abhinavagupta tells us:

So far [Utpaladeva] has explained how the group of *tattvas* exist as object and immediately preceding that he explained the nature of the subject also. Here, because of its importance, the text reveals the essence of the object because it is helpful for the recognition of one's own divinity. So it is a topic worth delineating in detail.²⁷

Again, we see Abhinavagupta telling us that we need to know the world; we need to know the essence of the objects we encounter if we want to achieve our own enlightenment. The *Āgamādhikāra* charts out the nature of the world, the materiality all around us.

Abhinavagupta's *Long Commentary* is interesting and helpful because he at times offers long and insightful expositions on various ideas that we do not find anywhere else; it is also difficult because Utpaladeva's autocommentary, the *Elucidation* (*vivṛti*), has been lost. As a result, Abhinavagupta's *Long Commentary* makes reference

throughout to particular specific words whose source is no longer extant. Still, many of his long excursions are coherent and compelling without recourse to Utpaladeva's lost text; the situation is also remedied to some extent by the availability of Abhinavagupta's earlier shorter commentary (*Ipv*). A translation for the *Long Commentary* as a whole and for this third section, the text of the *Āgamādhikāra*, is not yet available.²⁸ For this reason, when I offer translations drawing from Abhinavagupta's writing and particularly this text, the *Āgamādhikāra*, to explicate Abhinavagupta's thought, I give the passages of Sanskrit in the notes section at the end of each chapter. All translations are my own.

Panentheism and the New Materialism

Abhinavagupta's panentheism maps out the nature of matter, telling us we need to understand matter if we want to understand ourselves and our own enlightened divinity. This focus on what matter is, I suggest, can help steer our own thinking as we face a rapidly crashing environment and help to rethink how we relate to our material world. For a nascent New Materialism in particular, keenly attuned to how the way we think about matter directs what we do, Abhinavagupta's panentheism with its sophisticated articulation of subjectivity in relation to the matter of our world may help to refine our contemporary attitudes toward the rocks and insects and worms all around us. Of course, I am premising this suggestion on the provocative thesis that Lynn White articulated all those years ago—that our model of the world, our theology or cosmology, sets the stage for how we *treat* the matter of our world.²⁹ Indeed, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* attests in its helpful list of dated examples of usage, as early as 1991 we start to see panentheism associated with a way of addressing our environmental challenges.³⁰ What is it about panentheism that makes it environmentally friendly? The answer to that question, I might venture, has to do with the idea of linking things that seem

quite different from each other. Panentheism links the material world to something that is quite apart from its materiality, an outside force, a divinity, that transcends matter altogether. This cozy material affinity is indeed encoded linguistically in the word. As a concept itself, the prefix *pan*—that is, the world, matter, and materiality—is affixed to *theism*, the transcendence of deity. The two are not made into one, merged as in *pantheism*, but rather the materiality of the world and the transcendence of deity are linked, yet still held apart in a productive tension. In this sense, panentheism operates as a ligature holding in tension both the many and the one, both matter and transcendence.

I suspect that what made panentheism particularly attractive for Abhinavagupta in the 11th century was the ligature, its rather Tantric assertion to have one's cake and eat it too—that is, its claims toward both the materiality of the world *and* the transcendence of divinity.³¹ Panentheism can give us both consciousness and matter, not dissolving one or the other. Consciousness as something outside transcends the materiality of our world, yet it is held in productive tension with the world, not erasing the messy matter of immanence.³² In this respect, panentheism points to a way of thinking about the link between matter and consciousness, a metaphysical hitching together of two seemingly polar opposites. This book as a whole also proposes a similar sort of ligature, a comparative project bringing together disparate elements in the hope of a productive tension, an 11th-century Tantric on the one hand and a contemporary New Materialism on the other. It focuses on our contemporary concerns around what is sentient—animals? viruses? artificial intelligence?—set in relation to Abhinavagupta's articulation of what gives rise to sentience. And the book deals with our current conceptions of information as data—articulated in juxtaposition to Abhinavagupta's theology of *mantra*, mystic sound.³³ In this sense, the comparative project that unfolds in the following five chapters operates in the style of the 17th-century English Metaphysical poets, like John Donne, hitching together disparate things to reveal at the heart of things a sense of wonder.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One looks at Abhinavagupta's conception of subjectivity (*ahantā*) in relation to matter, and specifically in terms of what it can impart for a New Materialism. Subjectivity, (*ahantā*), a first-person perspective, works as the fulcrum of his panentheism. What makes us sentient depends on our capacity to identify with the sense of "I," rather than the "this" (*idantā*), a state of being an object. Abhinavagupta reminds us that attention to subjectivity is needed for thinking through our relationship to matter. Notably, Abhinavagupta uses psychological, linguistic modes, rather than our more familiar ontological distinctions, to parse out the differences between humans and nonhumans and matter. Not ontologically driven, this modal formula, rather helpfully for a New Materialism, decenters the human in our cosmology. Humans and rocks alike share a fluid ability to move between being a subject or an object, giving us consciousness innate to matter. At the same time that Abhinavagupta asserts an innate capacity for sentience, even for things that seem to be dead objects, like rocks, he also proposes a way to differentiate between things that are sentient and things that are not. With this distinction we also examine how Abhinavagupta helps us to think through how we get multiplicity within a philosophy that claims there is only one reality. Throughout this chapter I offer a comparative assessment of Abhinavagupta in relation to a New Materialism. Walt Whitman, for instance, a figure frequently invoked for a New Materialism, also poses an expansive first-person perspective in his poetry, a similarity, I suggest, that shares with Abhinavagupta's first-person-centered philosophy a capacity to enliven objects.

Chapter Two begins with a discussion of how science and scientists, from Carl Sagan to some contemporary neuroscientists such as Anil Seth, invoke wonder as a way of bringing in an atheistic transcendence. This chapter delineates Abhinavagupta's formulation of wonder (*camatkāra*), arguing that the phenomenology of wonder serves to underscore an inherent subjectivity, even in mere matter.

Tracing out the Indian genealogy of wonder through its roots in cooking, we see Abhinavagupta emphasizes the sensory and sensual elements of wonder. At the same time, Abhinavagupta's conception of wonder offers a way of delineating between what is alive and what is not in a way that offers a permeable boundary between mere matter and life. Wonder happens, Abhinavagupta explains, when the "I" can reflect on itself; it is the signal of life, sentience. With a keen phenomenological attention, Abhinavagupta's analysis of wonder turns on its head the way we usually think of wonder. He tells us that the power of wonder is not so much that it offers a transcendence that leaves behind the fetters of an earth-bound material body, but rather that wonder instead alters our vision of matter, pointing to its essential liveliness. This in turn alters how we understand transcendence. It is not an up and out situation, leaving behind sluggish dumb matter; instead it points to an inwardness, a heightened subjectivity. Abhinavagupta rewrites transcendence in one other way as well. We typically imagine transcendence as a space of timelessness, above the change of the world. Abhinavagupta instead rewrites time back into this transformed notion of transcendence.

[Chapter Three](#) begins with a discussion of Darwin's description of his loss of faith when he witnesses the parasitic wasp infecting the caterpillar. How could a benevolent God create this sort of monstrosity, he asks—a parasitic wasp inside the caterpillar, two beings, one body, boundaries transgressed. Here the focus is on the boundaries of bodies and agency. In this context, I discuss Abhinavagupta's idea of the subtle body as a body also inhabited by something other than the person claiming the body. Here, however, in this Tantric case, the other consciousness inhabiting the body is not an invading parasite directing the body, but an image of deities directing the body. I suggest that Abhinavagupta's theological inscription of deities driving human action adds an important element to the notion of bodies and matter. Abhinavagupta's theology offers a perspectival shift toward recognizing the body's own claims to intentionality, an intentionality that typically is only accorded to mind or spirit. In this sense, the panentheism out of

which Abhinavagupta fashions his conception of the subtle body enfolds within it an upgrade for the idea of bodies, of matter. Theology here registers a respect for the affective processes of the body. Locating gods in the body tells us that the mind is not the master in the house; rather, sentiency, will, and desire arise throughout the body's functions, separate from the mind's desires. Moreover, this theology of the body proposes these multiple affective registers in a way that does not dwell (neither lamenting nor rejoicing) on the subsequent disappointment and loss of the sovereignty of the ego and its free will. So while a contemporary thinker like Brian Massumi strives to find a model to understand the complex, refractory affective flows of the body in a language of the virtual, Abhinavagupta instead reads this complexity of multiple affective flows through a lens of the forces of deities with their own conscious trajectories. In this respect, this panentheist theology affords a foundational liveliness to the multiplicity of agencies that make up the body. Here it is referenced in Abhinavagupta's map of the subtle body, which sees the body itself as an ecology of beings, materially embedded.³⁴

Chapter Four opens with the conundrum of computer sentience: Stephen Hawking's and Elon Musk's deep fears of artificial intelligence. This chapter uses this framework to address a key element of Abhinavagupta's panentheism: how we attain sentience. This chapter first points to the differences we find between a currently popular panpsychism and Abhinavagupta's panentheism. Even as contemporary panpsychism is appealing precisely because it brushes aside dualistic conceptions of God, still we see in its formulation the influences of a Western legacy of transcendence. In this chapter I propose also that rather than look at the terms ubiquitously used to translate the notion of consciousness from Indian languages to English—terms like *cit*, *citi*, or *saṃvid*, which are typically employed to talk about consciousness—instead the term *vimarśa* more closely approximates what contemporary neuroscience understands as consciousness. I suggest that Abhinavagupta affords priority to *vimarśa* precisely because of its links to activity, a capacity

to do things in our material reality. With this observation, drawing on Harald Atmanspacher's classificatory work, we look at how Abhinavagupta's dual-aspect monism stacks up in relation to other 20th-century Western conceptions of dual-aspect monisms. I conclude the chapter by returning to my initial query regarding computer sentience.

[Chapter Five](#) returns to Darwin's anguish and loss of faith over the parasitic wasp and discusses newer findings that suggest the idea of signaling and information-sharing across species. The parasitic wasp comes to lay its eggs inside the caterpillar because the plants being attacked by the caterpillars signal to the wasps via pheromones. Using this framework, I then take up the idea of information where information, as I have discussed elsewhere, takes on a dual nature, both as material substance and as something that conveys mental intentionality.³⁵ I draw comparisons with contemporary Western ideas of information, its links to New Materialism and to Abhinavagupta's panentheism as a way of thinking about consciousness as information. The idea of information, I suggest, is attractive for a current perspective because it seems to take away the subjective element of knowledge, giving us something we can measure and manipulate. Yet, if we examine it more closely, I propose that instead what makes information powerful as a concept for us today is that it embeds an unspoken bivalency, which links back to the intentionality and meaning of the subject who knows. The final section of this chapter ties this bivalency back to Abhinavagupta's articulation of subjectivity (*ahantā*) and its corollary, a state of being object (*idantā*). Through this background, I examine Abhinavagupta's account of how we get diversity, agonistic relations of wasps and caterpillars, in a nondualism, a system where there is only one consciousness. I suggest that interpreting the *tattva* system, the cosmology Abhinavagupta inherits, as a *phenomenology* of consciousness moving from subjectivity to object, Abhinavagupta demonstrates a panentheism that is capable of unfolding to embrace the rich diversity that makes up our world.

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after the body had been left on the bed for three hours, and had then been pronounced lifeless by the medical attendant, according to the practice in that part of the country. To that Dr. Herz rejoined, in a second edition, that the medical attendant was no better judge than an ordinary man, inasmuch as all experimental tests were fallacious, and decomposition the only sure sign. He cites the following statement by an experienced Jewish physician, Dr. Hirschberg, of Königsberg (from the Jewish periodical, "Sammler," vol. ii., p. 153):—"I have practised medicine for forty years, and have always grieved over the practice amongst us of too hasty burial of the dead—on the day of decease. It happened once in my practice that a woman lay for dead three days and then awoke and revived. At first I would not allow the body to be moved from the bed, but the undertaker's men violently resisted me, taking up the body and laying it on the ground. According to their custom, they would have buried it the same day, had I not earnestly called out to them: 'Beware lest you do lay her in the ground this day! She is still alive, and the blame will be on you.' I had her covered with warm, woollen clothes; on the following morning some signs of life were manifest; she lay still, and gradually awoke out of her death-slumber."

Herz declared, as Wunderbar did subsequently, that the passages in the Talmud on which the Jewish custom was based had been misinterpreted; and he specially accused the rabbis Jacob Emden, of Altona, and Ezechel, of Prague, of rabbinical subtilty on the one hand, and of a fallacious dependence upon scientific signs of death on the other.

At the World's Medical Congress (Division of Eclectic Medicine), held in Chicago, June 3, 1893, the following resolution was proposed by Dr. John V. Stevens, and adopted:—

"Whereas we believe that many persons in the past, in the condition simulating death from various causes, have been buried alive; therefore,

“Resolved—That it should be the duty of all Governments to pass laws prohibiting the burial of bodies without positive proofs of death; that the nature of these proofs should be taught in all schools and printed in all newspapers throughout the world.”

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